

PreventionAlert

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Ecstasy: Parents Need To Check In

Parents of teens don't seem to be acting on the knowledge that the ecstasy epidemic could harm their children, according to a study released by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America in October 2003. In fact, when it comes to chatting about the dangers of drugs, ecstasy was less likely to be discussed than marijuana or alcohol, or any other licit or illicit drug.

Though 92 percent of parents say they've heard of ecstasy and 90 percent see great risk in its use, only 24 percent say they've discussed ecstasy with their children "a lot" in the past year. Only 3 percent believe their teenager has ever used ecstasy, though one in nine teenagers have tried it. While 3.3 percent of youth ages 12-17 have tried it, 15 percent of college-age youth 18-25 have. Clearly, it is the older, clubbing teens where the worry is the greatest, but parents are not picking it up. Though 35 percent of parents have had some discussion about ecstasy with their children, almost half of parents (41 percent) have never talked with their kids about ecstasy.

Incidence of ecstasy use

Though ecstasy use by teens appears to have stabilized at 11 percent between 2001-2002, the trend from the mid-nineties to now had been skyrocketing. Today, 2.6 million teens report having experimented with the dangerous hallucinogen-stimulant (it was 360,000 in 1996).

Chronic, or past-month users, of ecstasy are a smaller group: only 0.5 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds, and 1.1 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds. The mean age of ecstasy first use is 21. However, between 1998 and 2001, ecstasy first-users tripled among youth 12 to 17.

The recent good news is that youth themselves may be beginning to get the message of the harm of ecstasy, especially in the younger grades. For instance, from 2001 to 2002, past year use of ecstasy by 10th graders went down from 6.2 percent to 4.9 percent. Eighth graders and 12th graders showed similar declines.

Damaging effects of ecstasy

Known as MDMA (or 3-4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine), ecstasy produces an intense and pleasurable high, while putting users at risk of dramatic increases in body temperature, muscle breakdown, and kidney and heart failure. Hundreds of people have died using ecstasy and other club drugs, some on one pill alone. Death by overheating is not unusual. In the past eight years, those on ecstasy who have had to go to emergency rooms increased 20-fold, to 4,026 in 2002.

Just as dangerous are "fake" ecstasy concoctions (evidently cheaper to produce) which appeared last year at dance clubs and raves in California, Florida, Ohio, and Oregon and 10 other states. One drug, known as "Foxy" (5-MeO-DIPT) causes nausea, anxiety and "buzzing" that lasts up to 14 hours. Another known as AMT (alphamethyltryptamine) causes a radical loss of energy and blurred vision, as well as nausea and jaw clenching.

Compared to another powerfully toxic drug, meth-amphetamine, ecstasy triggers a larger increase in serotonin, which regulates mood, sleep, and pain, while interrupting its synthesis. Ecstasy can destroy serotonin axons and axon terminals. Studies have shown ecstasy users have significant short-term memory loss, suddenly losing the ability to read the most basic texts and calculate the simplest math problems. Some studies have shown that memory loss can persist as long as seven years.



What is being done?

Fifty-two percent of parents are hungry for more information on ecstasy. Anti-drug ads appear to help. Parents who have seen them are more likely to have talked to their children about the risks of drugs, and to have had a thorough discussion. In 2002, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America launched a multi-media education campaign focusing on ecstasy in partnership with Comcast, which has committed \$50 million. Key markets where ecstasy use is high are being targeted with anti-drug media messages: Baltimore, Philadelphia, Miami, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, Denver and Seattle.

On October 17, 2003, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson announced \$4 million in grants to 12 local anti-drug programs to specifically fight ecstasy and other club drugs, such as GHB. For example, Social Advocates for Youth in San Diego, CA, is focusing a \$343,000 grant on three high-risk age groups and their connection with the "rave" dance club setting where ecstasy is often taken. Oregon Partnership in Portland, OR, will use its \$342,576 grant to create a film on ecstasy and take it around to community and youth groups.

Questions about SAMHSA ecstasy grants can be directed to Dr. Pam Roddy at proddy@samhsa.gov or Dr. Soledad Sambrano at ssambrano@samhsa.gov.

Sources: *The 2003 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATs)*, www.drugfreeamerica.org; *2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, SAMHSA, 2003, www.samhsa.gov; National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) *Infofacts and Ecstasy: What We Know and Don't Know about MDMA*, A Scientific Review, at www.drugabuse.gov; *Ecstasy: What Is All the Rave About?*, SAMHSA, 2002.

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